

POLITICAL ART FROM THE PERIPHERY IN THE TIME OF THE GREAT PANDEMIC

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The exhibition *Fire and Brimstone* at Sydney's Cross Art Projects, features work by three Northern Territory artists: Chips Mackinolty (b. Morwell, 1954), Therese Ritchie (b. Newcastle, 1961) and Todd Williams (b. Perth, 1961), showcasing printed and virtual digital art works exploring both pre-pandemic and pandemic-era apocalyptic themes.

There are many logistical challenges to exhibitions in a time of uncertainty. Compounding the challenges posed by the crisis of representation, and in light of the catastrophic impact Covid-19 has had on the creative industries and protest, the exhibition must be understood through the spectre of the pandemic.

Public space has been reduced to a mortuary.

Crisscrossing duct tape dictates where we can stand and how far apart. The plague crosses of the middle ages have shifted from the doors of the infected and diseased and on to the pavement.

The health of our public institutions and their ability to manage the economy and social wellbeing has been shown to be moribund. We have privatised prisons, detention centres, transport services, job agencies, building inspections, aged care and quarantine. Despite vast bureaucracies, an invincible virus has shown how devastating the neo-liberal ideology really has become when privatisation and indifference have disabled our public institutions to respond.

In such a nihilistic context, does writing about art exhibitions, especially exhibitions with discernible concrete political messaging really matter? When the freedom to protest in public places has been curtailed, is there even a point to radical art?

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Radical propaganda artists have long utilised the instruments of mass circulation for social commentary. These three artists use collage and graphic art, juxtaposing images and text sourced from mass media, reworked, and re-arranged, to convey a concrete message and demand a response. Through a collective/collaborative practice, they make the point that legitimacy to represent is based on a foundation of *mutual rights and obligations*.

Mackinolty, Ritchie and Williams have individually and collectively given shape to and influenced contemporary NT art and culture, which now encompasses far more than it did in the mid-80s when it was only Ian Fairweather (1891–1974)

who featured largely in the national imagination about Top End artists.

In the mid-eighties, a constellation of factors came together to give birth to cultural movements that validated an *alternative* ethic and aesthetic defined by the NT experience.

Leaving the vibrant Sydney world of politics and art in the tumultuous period following the Vietnam War, Mackinolty, a self-described "semi-anarchist", brought his own firebrand radical propaganda style of activism to the NT. Raised on the dialectics of leftist ideology and cutting his teeth on demonstrations against Vietnam War militarism and cold-war nuclear stockpiling, he was active in supporting environmentalism and women's, indigenous and queer rights. His cumulative acts of defiance bring attention to the hegemonic order that perpetuates injustices throughout history.

Mackinolty's graphic design practice was nurtured inside Sydney University's Tin Sheds. Art-for-art's-sake has its place. But unlike artists who are content to create aesthetically pleasing abstractions, or conceptual works drowning in a sea of speculative subjectivity, Mackinolty was never content to produce conceptual artifices disconnected from the world around him. Mackinolty raged against the invincible forces to open public consciousness to important issues affecting our world.

Taking part in the first Sydney Gay Mardi Gras in 1978, a parade as protest, *the body-politic* as opposed to *the-body-fetish*, Mackinolty was part of a movement that confronted the NSW Police, chanting as a white heterosexual man: " Stop police attacks on gays, women and blacks". He was one of the 55 arrested.

In the early eighties, Mackinolty's unashamed protests as art, were planted inside the public sphere of a region stirring

with urgency over issues such as indigenous land rights, health, deaths in custody and incarceration, as he moved across Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin working collaboratively with Indigenous Australians in art centres, medical clinics and land councils, and established Green Ant Research Arts and Publishing, a business he started in Darwin with Peter Cooke.

As an example of cross collaboration forging links between cultures so disparate in experience and outlook, he worked with the people to foreground indigenous signifiers, subjects, and languages into the design. The zeitgeist was now being enriched by an understanding of the diversity of Indigenous languages, Pitjantjatjara, Jawoyn, Warlpiri, Yolgnu, Kunwok, the distinct vernacular solidified in graphic design font or script, cementing the legitimacy of Indigenous voices to speak to the public, and participate as equals in public affairs.

He hired Therese Ritchie, a proud and out lesbian and firebrand photographer who eventually became a business partner and collaborator, circulating images and texts that responded to the political and social issues affecting this frontier place.

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Removed from the Sydney-Melbourne media industries, through their art/work practices a distinct Top End visual culture began to emerge. The team produced and circulated prints, posters, flyers, banners, pamphlets, T-shirts, murals, paste up and slogans using art to bring attention to experience of collaborative engagement with indigenous Australians. From café walls, to social services, legal services and clinics, offices, foyers, from private living room walls to exhibition spaces,

and into the streets, a visual language, an iconography distinct to the Top End experience began to emerge, outside of the galleries and into the public sphere, one that urged for justice in the far flung frontier.

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The Northern Territory was an exciting place to be in the eighties and nineties. Despite the political dominance of the conservative Country Liberal Party, the NT was a magnet for idealistic people seeking meaningful work in indigenous agencies, in media, health clinics, language centres, legal aid organisations and land councils working with and for indigenous self-determination. Anti-militarists, particularly radical women inspired by the UK's Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp interventions (1981–2000), congregated in and around Alice Springs in 1983, protesting against American military presence in Pine Gap (this history explains in part why the Alice continues to be a magnet for radical feminists and lesbians to this date). Many other environmentalists were drawn to protest against the risks posed by the Ranger and Jabiluka uranium mines in the world heritage listed Kakadu National Park. Environmentalism is spearheading the current anti-fracking movement.

Feminists were also drawn to the rise in challenging the patriarchy not only in policy or legislative arenas, but also on the streets, establishing safe houses across Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin, as well as in remote communities, for women escaping domestic violence and counselling services for victims of sexual assault. Annual events such as International Women's Day (held in March) and Reclaim the Night (held in September) provided extra opportunities to network and socialise.

The Roma Bar in Darwin became a regular alt-Darwin hangout, which held poetry recitals and art exhibitions, where Djon Mundine (sporting long thick dreadlocks) networked and socialised before heading back to his role as Art Adviser in Ramingining. He coordinated the large pool of artists who produced the burial poles, the majestic *Aboriginal Memorial Installation* for the 1988 Bicentenary, and the artists' tribute to his influence in the region has been noted with the inclusion of his image artwork, *Wali (possum-marsupial)* (2020) in the exhibition.

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It was in this context that I first met Therese Ritchie, an artist who graduated with BA (Fine Arts) Northern Territory University (1985) and MA (Visual Arts) Charles Darwin University (2005). I have followed this culture maker from her arrival in Darwin, changing the atmosphere of women's parties with her s/punk defiance. Suddenly, my consciousness merged queer sexual politics with a broader critical consciousness, where contemporary artists, activists and beatnik-political poets not afraid to bite, gave form to our concerns on a broader scale.

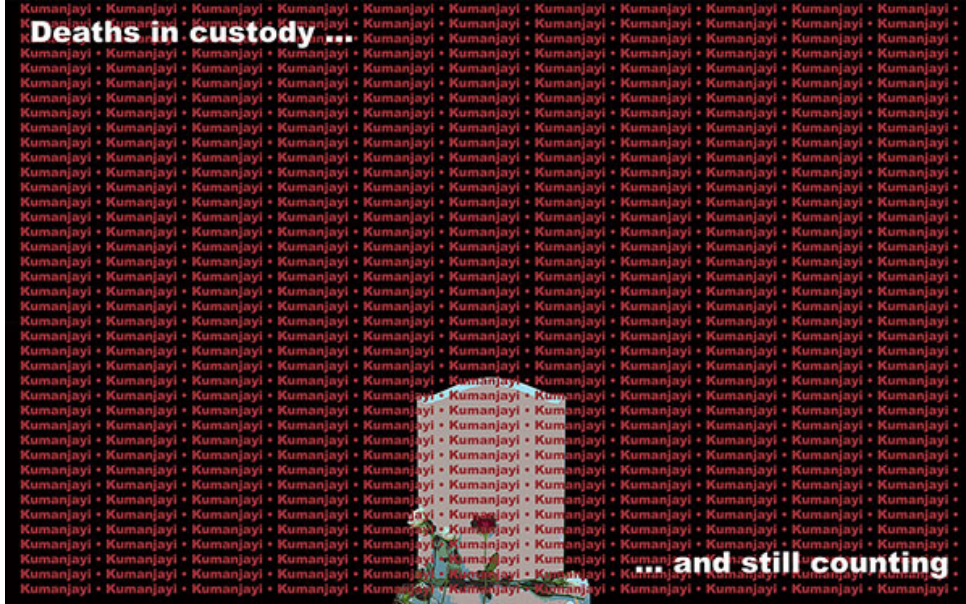
Therese, much like her fellow collaborators, Chips and Todd with whom she has developed and exhibited many large bodies of work, is an artist not afraid to be blunt about corrupt institutions and governance. Speaking truth to power, her art has a lyricism and political activism harnessed by a living, breathing, contemplative practice that seeks ethical relationship/s to place.

Ritchie's solo and collaborative print practice with Mackinolty was recognised with an important exhibition *Not Dead Yet* (2010) curated by the late Anita Angel at Charles Darwin University's Art Gallery and Collection.



Top: Therese Ritchie, *They all look the same to me*, 2020, Ilford Galerie Prestige Cotton Rag Smooth 300gsm, 80 x 50 cm

Bottom: Todd Williams, *Coals new world*, 2020, Ilford Galerie Prestige Cotton Rag Smooth 300gsm 80 x 50 cm



Top: Chips Mackinolyt, *Kumanjaji*, 2020, Ilford Galerie Prestige Cotton Rag Smooth 300gsm, 50 x 80 cm

Bottom: Djon Mundine, *Wali (Possum-Marsupial)*, 2020, still from moving image artwork

In 2014 they collaborated on *Get Well Soon: A diagnosis* exhibited in Gallery Two Six, tackling the prevalence of kidney disease amongst Aboriginal people. In 2019–2020 the Museum and Art Gallery NT further cemented her reputation as one of Darwin's most important culture makers with *Burning Hearts* a mid-career solo exhibition focusing on the role photography plays in her practice, that was curated by Dr Wendy Garden.

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Chips, Therese and Todd emerged at the same time as artists Franck Gohier, Rob Brown, Colin Holt and JBird (dec.). Therese forged a relationship with Todd when they met in mid-eighties at the NTU art school. Influential curators Steve Fox and Cath Bowdler harnessed a visual culture that resonated with the aspirations of many Indigenous artists, Indigenous art centres, legal aid workers, medical services, land councils, field officers, cultural advisors, anthropologists, linguists and interpreters, white and black supporting and demanding Indigenous claims for self-determination and forging strong cross-cultural relationships with each other.

It is not surprising that important artist-run spaces like Watch-this Space and 24Hr Art (now NCCA) mushroomed across Alice Springs and Darwin, becoming a space for those with an alternative sensibility, whose conceptualisation of material forms and meaning came to be presented through exhibitions, openings, artist talks and publications.

Art and music festivals celebrating indigenous artists and musicians flourished, with events such as Skinnyfish-produced Barunga Festival and Merepen Arts Festival in Daly River kicking off the dry season and

an excuse to camp out bush, sing and dance, and take back to Darwin as wearable art, hand-made batik t-shirts from the Daly River artists.

Outside of the Sydney-Melbourne cultural hegemony, if the phenomenon of local culture in Australia's remote urban fringes can be understood by the influence of rock-music, such that Brisbane has been indelibly defined by the likes of "The Saints" while Perth's "The Triffids", then without a doubt, Darwin's musical heart beat was given pulse by Todd Williams, the lead singer of "The Swamp Jockeys" which formed in 1985.

On their tour of Arnhem Land they were supported by Yolgnu musicians, bringing traditional vocals and instruments *bilma* (ironwood clapsticks) and *yidaki* (didgeridoo) distinct musical instruments and lyrics in language. These Yolgnu musicians, including the late great Gurrumul 'The Guru' Yunupingu on keyboards, guitar and percussion, went on to form Yothu Yindi.

Local bands performed original songs, in suburban back yards, pubs, halls and sheds, where the audience swarmed with defiant types, artists, activists, raconteurs, provocateurs, impossible imposters the likes of Chips and Therese, there to experience music and lyrics about their own experience of place.

Since the Swamp Jockeys, Williams has made a career as visual artist, animator, graphic designer, musician, DJ, and a film maker. He is currently the chief creative for the VAMPtv project at the NT Music School.

In 2013, Mackinolty opened *Groggy*, a collaborative exhibition at NCCA by Therese Ritchie and Todd Williams that tackled the silence around non-indigenous alcohol consumption in the NT.

In 2012, Ritchie began showcasing *The LittlePrick Editions*—digital prints exhibited

at David Hancock's Gallery Two Six. As well as pumping them out herself, Ritchie enlisted Williams and Mackinolty and other local artists to create a stock of reimagined life-style magazine covers, spoofing the vested interests in government and business by exposing both the banality and connivance of informercial *propaganda* and the "rapturous" danger posed by the prevailing status quo.

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We are living in perilous times. In many ways the social, economic, and political disruption created by the pandemic provides us with opportunities for deeper reflection. The world is racing towards a perfect storm of destruction the likes of which we have never seen.

It is challenging to write again in the face of apocalyptic truth—that our moral and political order is no longer supportable. Are we content with market economy servitude? How much of the endless amounts of the profligates' propaganda can we swallow? Why have we given the reins to rapacious narcissists unperturbed by threats of mass servitude and collective extinction?

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In writing about these three artists, I found myself digging through buried memories experiencing deep disassociation from the world. Yet I plunged into my memory, to reimagine what their *ethos* means to me, not only as an act of nostalgia, but as an act of defiance, to urge for a crucial recalibration of ourselves. To reclaim the public in discourse, in governance, in physical space, in halls, in museums, in galleries, in sheds, in gardens and parks, in community halls and schools, in streets pasting political posters on the very walls that matter most, to scrawl a slogan, articulating,

communicating, strategizing, finding ways to deface and bring attention to the necessity of collective action in challenging hegemonic power that is haemorrhaging the globe.

These three artists continue to sing and create, engaging and communicating extolling the virtue of *caring about community and country*. This exhibition makes an important point—there is an urgency to reclaim the public as a material body animated by a collective spirit in solidarity, as a realm that belongs to and must be cared for by all. I look forward to the day when their works exit the confines of a pandemic regulated art gallery and go on to adorn public space open to and being used by all.

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L to R: Chips Mackinoly, *Kumanjayi*, 2020, 50 x 80 cm. Therese Ritchie, *Black Lives Matter*, 2020, 64 x 40 cm. Therese Ritchie, *Economic Vampires*, 2020, 80 x 50 cm. Therese Ritchie, *King Coal*, 2020, 80 x 50 cm. Chips Mackinoly, *He'll stop the next war*, 2020, 80 x 50 cm